

At this sort of half-dismissal, the old gentleman plunged down upon the sofa in despair.

"As you please, madame," said he; "and I don't know that a whim more or less matters much."

Before Madame Dupastel could answer him, the door opened and let in a handsome, well-dressed young man, looking very excited, and, in his general carriage, not unlike a soldier about to lead an assault. He darted towards the mistress of the house, but stopped short as he caught sight of the unexpected third party who sat there, with a look in the keen grey eyes that glittered under his false eyebrows, that seemed to say the place would not be taken without a struggle. The lady kept her seat, and did not, by a look or gesture, do anything to help the new-comer out of his embarrassment. However, he quickly recovered his self-possession, and said, very respectfully—

"Madame, when I took the liberty of requesting the favour of an interview, I hoped to see you alone. Allow me still to hope for that privilege."

"This gentleman is an old friend of my family," replied Erminia; "and you can have nothing to tell me which he might not listen to."

The colonel thanked her by a grateful look, and squared himself on the sofa.

"Indeed, madame, what I have to say must be heard by you only," said Randeuil, speaking mildly, but firmly. "Allow me then to speak just a few words, without the presence of a third person."

"After what the lady has just said, your importunity is misplaced, sir," interposed the colonel, sharply. The young man turned round to him, and said, though very politely—

"I spoke to madame, and not to you. I do entreat you," said he to Erminia, "not to refuse my request."

"The lady has already told you——" answered the old man; but this time he was not permitted to finish his sentence. Erminia was one of those women who always change their mind when they find their "mind" supported by another, and who have a particular dislike of despotism in the shape of "advice."

"Excuse me, colonel," said she, rising; and, without hesitation, she moved towards the door of the dining-room, opened it, and beckoned Randeuil to follow; while, at the same moment, she nailed the old man to the sofa, from which he had half risen, by darting at him an authoritative glance which he durst not disobey.

"Now then, sir," said Erminia to the young man, "I am ready to listen. What have you to say to me?"

Randeuil was about to shut the door close.

"That is no good," observed Erminia, half humorously, half anxiously.

"Perhaps he will overhear?" suggested Randeuil, looking askance at M. La-reynie, whom he perceived to be as easy on his sofa as if it had been the gridiron of St. Laurence.

And now, indeed, Erminia laughed outright. "Well, well!" said she, "in the first place, he's rather deaf; and, in the second, why, probably, you can speak low."

HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS.

THE best manner of providing these has been a subject much discussed of late, and various excellent schemes have been projected, and in many cases carried out, for doing so. Lodging-houses in large towns for young clerks and mechanics, separated from their families, and similar establishments for females in a like situation—sempstresses or servants out of place—have been provided by the co-operating zeal of the philanthropist and wisdom of the speculator—the former anxious to preserve those removed unavoidably from home influence against the risk of descending in the social scale, by the moral contamination to which they are therefore exposed; and the latter willing to prevent, or to endeavour to prevent, the increase of the dangerous, and consequently the unproductive, not to say expensive, classes of the community. Strange to say, there is a measure, on the advisability of which much diversity of opinion at present prevails; and the immediate consequence of which, if carried into effect, would be to deprive many, and some of those the most helpless and dependent, of their natural homes; and yet it is seldom or never considered, either by its advocates or opponents, in regard to this its most material point.

This measure, “The proposal to legalize marriage with a deceased wife’s sister,” has been called, in good faith by some, in irony by others, “a woman’s question,” which is very true. It has also been called, in the same manner, or manners, “a wife’s question,” which one might have supposed almost every one of common sense would have perceived to be incorrect. In what way the possibility of a husband marrying his wife’s sister, after her (the wife’s) death, could affect the peace of the wife more than the possibility of his marrying any other woman, it is certainly difficult to conceive; yet the opponents of such marriages found their strongest argument on the supposed unhappiness and disunion to be created between husband and wife by such a possibility; and the advocates, admitting (what they need not admit) such supposition by a sneer at the female jealousy which causes the opposition, yet found their strongest argument on the advantage to be gained by the wife during her lifetime, and the husband after her death, in the prospect of a future mistress to the family, who should unite both the natural and matrimonial tie.

The fact is, that, in the case of married people, this measure would affect individual cases merely according to character and circumstances, and not at all generally, or in the abstract. If a man be so lost to delicacy and good feeling as to show his wife pretty plainly that he is anxious to be at liberty to marry her sister, no doubt it must be very unpleasant to her feelings; but the unpleasantness must be very nearly the same as if he had evinced a desire to marry any one else: the loss of his affection must cause equal bitterness, no matter to what object it may be diverted; and should that bitterness create the very natural wish that he should be frustrated in his designs—the very likely hope that his ill-placed love may be unsuccessful—such wishes and hopes would be surely strengthened by her confidence in the right feeling and affection of her sister. Here, at least, the stranger would be the worse. If to the husband’s infidelity be added the rival’s triumph, surely that rival is more likely to triumph if an alien in blood; unless women as a class are to be considered so degraded in feeling as that the sisterly tie creates, instead of love and good-will, indifference, not to say animosity.

Where a woman has no just cause for jealousy, and is not of a naturally suspicious and self-tormenting nature, she witnesses with perfect complacency her husband's proper attentions and politenesses to her female friends and companions, as well as to those relatives on both sides, against his future marriage with whom there is neither legal nor moral prohibition. To a woman in such circumstances a removal of the present disability could only place her sister, in ordinary cases, in a like situation with those; and if her husband's good principles and affection for her be placed, on former conviction, beyond a doubt, in what possible manner could such removal operate to disturb such conviction?

It is supposing too much to imagine that the instant effect of this measure would be to make all right-minded men contemplate a wrong; especially as we find the existing state of things does not coerce wrong-minded men into acting rightly; or that all unsuspicious, happy-tempered wives are to be converted into jealous viragos, merely because there are two or three women more in the world whom their husbands, should they survive them, may marry if they choose.

On the other hand, the case fondly supposed, and interestingly pictured, of a wife and mother planning, or even contemplating, with satisfaction and pleasure, such a future union as securing a kind and careful parent to her orphaned children, and a faithful and affectionate partner to her widowed husband, has just as little existence in reality, and affords just as untenable grounds on which to found an argument in favour of the *general* benefits to be derived from such marriages. In this, as in the former, character and circumstances must decide each separate case. If a wife and mother ever seriously realizes the possibility of another wife and mother in her place—and it is to be doubted—if, in the prospect of death, she plan or provide for such a possibility, certainly, if a sensible and judicious, as well as a tender and affectionate, wife and mother, she would plan, or at least wish, that her successor in these relations should be equally tender, affectionate, sensible, and judicious as herself; but that she would, in that case, necessarily, or even always probably, select her sister, does not always follow.

Without supposing the many instances in which sisters differ materially in their moral and religious principles, there may be even minor faults of temper, of disposition, of habit; deficiencies of intellect, of education, of mere manner; objections grounded on uncongeniality of sentiment, on difference of temperament, on infirmity of health; any or all of which are as likely to exist in the case of so near a relative as in that of a stranger, and certainly must be much better known and understood. In a word, in the very unnatural circumstances supposed, if a woman be capable of choosing rightly, she will be incapable of being influenced by the plausible consideration that a relative *must* be the best, wisest, and most loving, merely on account of the relationship; and, if she be not capable of choosing rightly, her advice had better not be attended to. Here, as in the former argument, too much has been taken for granted—too much scope has been allowed to the imagination; and what might possibly occur in individual cases has been permitted to assume the aspect of being the rule in all. Because a sister may, and, if she have the opportunity, will, act treacherously towards a sister, just as she would to any other person—her disposition being bad, and her morals low—it was too readily assumed that women in general would distrust their sisters' intentions and conduct, unless held strictly in check by a legal prohibition. And because members of one family are very likely to be one in feeling and principle, and would, in that case,

have a right beyond a stranger to preference and trust, it was taken for granted that they are always so ; or that, even if a difference exist, the mere tie of relationship is a claim to confidence, above wisdom, probity, judgment, nobility of thought, superiority of sentiment, or any other quality which should command our esteem. A step-mother—and that much-maligned relation is, probably, in the greater number of instances, a good sort of person enough—gives a better guarantee of her fitness for the office in her own integrity and good sense than in the mere fact of a previous relationship.

It is utterly impossible that any other woman could feel for children what their mother does : the conduct of any person fulfilling the maternal duties without the actual tie must be regulated by what may be called even a higher motive than maternal instinct—thorough good principle ; and it is that which should be looked for rather than any sentimental affection. Unless in a few cases, where the heart selects one or two among the many connected by ties of blood on whom to bestow peculiar affection, the natural rule is, that the affections decrease in intensity with the receding relationship ; and persons amiable and benevolent in disposition, of strong affections, and most closely united in regard to the brothers or sisters with whom they have been brought up, will yet grieve little for the death of a brother or sister's child. Nor should it be forgotten that an aunt placed in the capacity of step-mother, if she be inclined to neglect her duty, or perform it ill, holds a much more irresponsible position than a stranger ; and that the situation of those under her care must therefore be, beyond comparison, worse. A stranger has the watchful eyes of not only the father's, but the dead mother's, relatives on her conduct : she dare not, for fear of shame, be as careless or as harsh as she would be. Even her husband may, from old association, be inclined to defer a good deal to the wishes or opinions of his first wife's family : if they be rich or influential, he may do so from interested motives ; if his first marriage were one of affection, from a better feeling. The children are, therefore, to a great extent, guarded from her power, should she be disposed to use it ill : the world itself will exercise a closer *espionnage* on her actions ; but the aunt is all in all, and woe be to the young people if she be not what she should.

A much stronger case may be supposed, where the aunt, having a family of her own, would be anxious, in the case of wealth and influence, to secure the greatest amount of both for her own children. Here, indeed, she may be a powerful enemy. A stranger has no claim on the maternal relatives of the first wife's children ; cannot interfere in any way with their (the children's) rights ; but the aunt has an equal title ; and, without even supposing actual dishonesty, it would be expecting too much from human nature did she not, in the majority of cases, exert it. True, she might exert it were she the wife of any other man than her late sister's husband ; but she could scarcely, perhaps, do so to such effect, and certainly not to the exciting of such bitterness of feeling in the injured persons, or so much to the degradation of her own moral nature, or the hardening of her own sensibilities.

But it must further be doubted whether the position would be a very enviable one to the aunt herself ; and this even by those who are the most strenuous asserters of the advantages to be gained by the widower and children. If the position of "second in affection" be always in some degree an unpleasant one to the feelings of a woman of any delicacy, demanding from her great exercise of self-control, it must be manifestly worse in the case contemplated. A stranger might flatter

herself that she would have been her husband's first choice had he had the opportunity ; but the sister, who has a vivid recollection of the long period before and after the first marriage, during which she was *nothing* and her sister *all*, cannot have any such satisfaction. This may be regarded, however, as a mere viewing the matter in a sentimental light ; still, as such, it will have weight with some.

The women most nearly concerned, those to whom this question is one of paramount importance, are not the wives and mothers of England, or the sisters, who are supposed to be expecting to become wives and mothers in so unsisterly a manner ; but the *sisters*, who, perhaps, not only are not expecting, at any near period, or under any particular circumstances, to be wives and mothers, but probably have very little hope, it may be, very little wish, of ever being so at all.

There is scarcely any one who cannot count among his or her acquaintance a number of families in which a sister—deprived of parents, and, therefore, of home, or, it may be, only to serve and assist a beloved relation—resides with a married sister, sharing her cares, cheering her by pleasant companionship, and being regarded by her husband, no less than by her, as a relative. Now it is not difficult to foresee that the proposed alteration in the marriage law would quite prevent this. Whatever might be the feeling of the wife, no young woman could accept the protection, the affection, the attentions—quite proper when given by a man who can never legally be more to her than a brother, and whom she is expected to regard as such—from a man who might, by the accident of a moment or the sickness of a few days, be in a position to offer her his hand. All attention and respect which he might with propriety offer to any other female acquaintance or distant relative she might, of course, with equal propriety, receive ; but certainly not that brotherly kindness and familiarity which make it quite common, and quite correct, as the law at present stands, for her to travel alone with him, to remain in his house a resident alone with him, during her sister's absence ; to allow him to act for her in legal or other business matters as her nearest connexion—in fact, to assume in all respects the responsibility and character of a brother ; or, if there be much difference in their relative ages, in this latter point more of a father.

What is to become of the vast number of young persons, or persons not young, so placed, is a serious consideration. In the middle and lower classes there are many women thus situated, who—able to contribute to their own support, but not entirely to maintain themselves, by teaching, by needlework, by other means—accept thankfully an asylum in a well-married sister's house ; giving, in lieu of lodging and board, assistance, during otherwise idle hours, in the household business, little presents to the mother or children, or a trifling sum, which would only procure starvation in a solitary lodging. What is to become of these now happy, protected, and yet not quite dependent persons ? Are they to be driven forth to the lonely independence which to many *working* women is sheer penury and destitution, if not vice and infamy ?

That the division of the human race into families, bound by a tie of mutual interest and affection into households, acknowledging one governing head, and reciprocating kindness and friendly offices, is that contemplated by Nature, no one can deny ; and though in all communities there must be a number who cannot—from lack of family ties, or because the work necessary for their support obliges them to live in another manner—enjoy this happy arrangement, yet the benefit to individuals or nations produced by the maintenance of the majority in this their

naturally and divinely-intended position is so obvious, and so generally acknowledged, that every day sees fresh exertions made for assimilating the dwellings of those separated from home to something as like it as possible. Human beings were not formed morally or physically to be driven in herds like cattle, or to work in swarms like bees, or repose in flocks like sheep. This is not the age in which it is necessary to impress the fact; we have learned to think that even soldiers' barrack-rooms were too much like pens, and that a nearer approach to a home might make them better men; in factories, in workshops, it is not to be questioned that those operatives who are enabled to maintain, or who belong to, a decent home, must have the advantage in good conduct, in thrifty habits, in industry; and all employers have found it to their interest to encourage the binding of "the bundle of sticks." The waifs and strays of society are always liable to become inimical to its peace; though trained to act in concert during the hours of discipline or work, like the wheels and cogs of a machine, there is no real unity of purpose, no community of interest, apart from that work; but the family, or household, is the centre from which radiates all the lesser and remoter connexions, of more distant relations, of neighbours, of friends. The household is, then, the thing to be kept intact by all who wish prosperity to a community or a nation.

How many households would be broken up, as has been said, by the carrying into effect of this projected measure! It would be folly to deny the apprehension of this. The present state of society shows it. Scarcely ever is a young female friend, on however friendly and familiar terms she may be, and however unsuspecting the wife, and above suspicion the husband, received as a permanent inmate in a family; the dread of observation and censure on her most innocent words and actions by malicious, or at least silly and unreflecting, acquaintances, must prevent it. No one but a sister, by the united voice of society, can fill that sisterly place; and from that place society can scarcely afford that she should be driven out.

In the higher, no less than the middle and lower, ranks, the evil would be great. Young women of rank and independent means could, no doubt, if deprived of parental protection, more readily find a suitable and respectable home among strangers; yet it would but ill compensate for the unreserved intimacy and friendship of the brother's and sister's fireside. To those legislators for women who are so fond of pointing to matrimony as the climax of female happiness, as the ultimate end and object of every woman's existence, we may just put the question—if their plan gives many a woman a chance of one offer, may it not lessen her chance of some others? A young woman consenting to live, under the circumstances proposed, in her brother-in-law's house, will be as much exposed to the critical observation of her male acquaintance as her female; every now harmless freedom liable to misconstruction, her motives doubted, her words and actions misinterpreted. Is it not possible that some worthy and intelligent man, who would otherwise have loved her but the more for her truly sisterly feeling, and built thereon his confidence in her conduct as a wife, may not quite be able to escape these ugly doubts and fears, and be thus deterred from offering her his hand? It seems at least as likely that her situation should arouse the jealousy of the watchful and not confident lover, as of the otherwise occupied, and, perhaps, happily secure, sister and wife, much as this has been insisted on.

But there is a word or two to be said for the wives also, though their interest

in the question is not that generally supposed. Of course, the permission for these marriages implies, at some future time, the permission for marriages where the relationship is at present precisely the same; namely, that of women with their deceased husband's brothers. Common sense cannot tolerate the absurdity of recognising the husband's brothers as also the wife's, while the wife's sisters are not the husband's. Here wives may, though not as generally, suffer as much from the breaking up of relationships as the sisters in the other case; for a husband will scarcely permit to be offered, nor will his wife consent to receive, the attention and affection which his brother may now unblameably give her. The cases, of course, are not at all so numerous, where a married woman actually needs the protection or kindness of her husband's brother; still there are many instances where the profession or trade of a married man obliges frequent absence from home; and where his brother—the wife herself having none—assumes, to a certain extent, the supervision of the household, or of the business; indeed, even when the wife has a brother: still a husband might prefer placing such a confidence in his own, as being less likely to have an interest antagonistic to his.

Perhaps it may be objected that the women's grievance in this business has been too strongly put; but it should be remembered that any arrangement which weakens a family tie must press more heavily on them. Though they are daily becoming less dependent and helpless, they will never be so completely helpful and independent but that circumstances and situations, states and conditions of life, which may not materially affect a man's happiness or respectability, will be of the utmost consequence to theirs; nor is it to be desired that they should not be so affected. The promoters of the measure, too, while endeavouring to *prove* the *possible* advantage of it to women, have so completely assumed the certain advantage to men, as to take no pains to seek for or offer proof. There is nothing unfair, therefore, in the opponents assuming that the former is the ground to be attacked; and that, if defeated on this point, it may be justly considered, even on their own showing, a one-sided measure. It would not be difficult, however, to convince any impartial person that men in general would be as little gainers by the forfeiture of existing brotherhood, for the contingency of future marriage, as women; and that the restoration to respectability of those who have violated the law would be dearly purchased by the inconvenience and unhappiness entailed on the much greater number, who neither want nor wish to violate it as it stands, nor would take advantage of it if it were altered.

This question has, with much zeal, but with great want of knowledge and judgment, been argued on moral and theological grounds—the fact being that it is a purely social one, connected, not immediately, but merely secondarily, with religion and morality. The direct law of God contains neither injunction nor prohibition in the case, though both have been assumed, and by those who should have been better informed. This fact, however, gives no more just reason for maintaining that a prohibition should not be placed, if the good of society requires it—or that, being placed, it should not be obeyed, and the disobedience considered as a wrong—than for maintaining the impropriety and injustice of the numerous laws found necessary to be enacted and enforced in every state and government, which have, nevertheless, nothing to do *immediately* with actual moral right or wrong.

GAETANO SFERRA.

IN TWO PARTS.—I.

THE captain of our yacht was a reticent man, yet I was determined to learn how he had received that scar on his breast. It was not without difficulty, however, that I induced him to commence the following narrative:—

It was in the month of May, 18—, that we were conducting to Malta an Englishman, who, like yourselves, travelled for pleasure. We had been two hours in the harbour, and were to remain there eight more; so, instead of sticking to my ship, as I ought to have done, I thought I would look up some old friends in Valetta. Well, these jolly fellows gave me a dinner, and after this, as a matter of course, we must go and take a cup of coffee at the *Café Grec*. If you ever go to Valetta, take your cup of coffee there; it is not the most beautiful, but it is the best establishment in the whole city—*Strada Inglise*, a hundred steps from the prison.

We went, then, to take our cup at the *café*. It was about seven o'clock in the evening, and we were all chatting at the door, when suddenly I saw turn round the corner, and enter the street, a young man between five-and-twenty and thirty, pale, scared—a picture of terror, in fact. I was about to touch my neighbour on the shoulder, in order to draw his attention to this singular apparition, when all at once the young man darted upon me, and, before I had time to defend myself, he gave me a stab with a knife in the breast, leaving the knife in the wound; then, darting off as rapidly as he had come, he turned the corner of the street, and disappeared.

All this was the work of a second. No one had seen me struck; I hardly knew it myself. Everybody looked stupefied, and repeated the name of “Gaetano Sferra.” I was soon made aware that I was becoming weak: I felt sick and faint.

“What has that strange fellow done to you? How pale you are!” said my neighbour.

“What has he done!” repeated I; “look here!” I took the knife by the handle, and drew it out of the wound. “See, this is what he has done.” Then, feeling myself getting weaker and weaker, I sat down on a chair to prevent myself from falling to the ground.

“The assassin! the assassin!” cried every one. “It was Gaetano Sferra—we recognised him; it was he, the assassin!”

“Yes, yes,” murmured I, mechanically, “it was Gaetano Sferra. The assassin, the assas——” I finished; it was all over with me; I remained two or three days insensible.

“Well, the assassin was arrested, I hope?”

“Um—no! It was quite impossible that Gaetano Sferra could have dealt the blow, seeing that he was at that precise moment in prison, condemned to death, and the priest with him preparing him for his execution on the following day.”

“It must have been some other person who closely resembled him—a twin-brother, perhaps?”

“Anyhow,” said I at the time, “it is hard to have received a stab from a knife, and not to know why one has been presented with it, or who gave it. But if ever I meet him, there will be an account to settle between us.”